

Gardening 101 Lesson Ten – Weeding and Feeding

Weeding

Gardeners don't want weeds in the garden because they compete with garden plants for water and food. The rotten thing is that weeds generally do really well in our gardens and reproduce themselves much faster than garden plants. So an inevitable part of gardening is weeding.

There are two basic ways to weed - digging out the weed, root and all, or cutting the weed off at ground level often enough that it loses the energy to re-grow. Digging is very effective but to dig, the gardener has to get down on hands and knees and work amongst the other plants. Chopping the heads off weeds can be done standing up and is less likely to damage garden plants but it does have to be done over and over again. Most gardeners use both techniques, depending on the situation or tools at hand.

Dandelions, for instance and weed trees such as Manitoba maple, European buckthorn, and Japanese knotweed, should be dug up with as much of the root as possible to eliminate them. The general technique is to slip a tool such as a trowel into the ground close by the target weed and then to lever it so that the soil is loosened. Grasp the weed stem and pull it straight up out of the ground. If there's a lot of weeds in an area, loosen up all the soil and then pull out each weed until all are gone. Trees will take a lot more digging.

Chopping off weed heads can be done with a hoe; that's why it can be done standing up. There are lots of different hoe designs including a Dutch hoe which is pushed forward through the soil so that the blade cuts off weeds just below the soil surface. Some gardeners prefer a pulling action so they use a regular hoe or scuffler which is inserted into the earth and then pulled back towards the body as it slices off weeds. If you have a large area to weed, it's much faster to do it with a hoe, as long as there's enough room to manoeuvre the tool without endangering the garden plants.

Feeding

Plants need food and drink to survive and flourish. Food comes from the earth in which they grow so it's up to the gardener to make sure soil is rich enough feed plants. The best way of doing this is to make sure the soil is full of nutrients before any plant even goes in. (Remember lesson one in this series?) Most of us, however, are stuck with the soil our plants are already in but there are a few ways of ensuring your plants are well-fed.

The first way is apply compost to the garden regularly. Compost can easily be made using a backyard compost bin. To make compost, you collect garden and household debris which will decompose (think of vegetable parings, coffee grounds and tea bags, garden trimmings, tree leaves, etc.), mix them with some dirt, and aerate it from time to time until you end up with rich loamy-looking earth which is full of good things for plants. Bagged mushroom compost and sheep manure is pretty easy to buy and will also work. Whatever you use can just be spread over the surface of the soil. You can scratch the compost layer into the soil with a garden fork but it's easier just to let the earthworms take care of pulling it down into the soil.

Don't forget container plants. When pot soil loses its nutrients, replacing the earth or applying fertilizers will provide more. Fertilizers can be bought pretty readily at gardening supply stores, hardware, or even food stores. Just pay attention to the three numbers on the container. The first refers to the nitrogen component, the second to the phosphorus level, and the third to the potassium content. Flowering plants require a fertilizer with a high middle number (10-20-10 for example) while leafy plants will respond to ones with a high first number (20-10-10 say). The last number (potassium) indicates that the fertilizer will supply minerals which help plants grow well and resist disease.

Plants need water too – one inch a week is the general recommendation. If you place an empty, cleaned tuna can in the garden, you can easily judge whether there's been enough rain in any one week. (Don't forget to empty it out at the end of the week though.) If you do have to water the garden beds, give it all in one shot. Watering a bit every day is a waste as the ground never gets wet deeply enough to supply moisture to plant roots. Watering a lawn is generally a waste too; grass turns brown and goes dormant in the absence of water. Once it rains, it turns green and resumes growing.

Next Lesson: Lawns and Vegetables